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ABSTRACT

This Title I pilot program had two broad purposes: (1) to create a growing desire to read and (2) to introduce the skills that are necessary for success and satisfaction in reading. Since the children involved had limited experiential backgrounds, part of the program was geared to providing experiences through the type of classroom setting, the wider school and community environment, and informal reading contacts. Built on the premise that the reading skills on the prereading level are the same as at the highest stage of reading development, the prereading program incorporated the following skills: (1) listening for comprehension of content, (2) auditory discrimination, (3) visual discrimination and development, (4) oral language skills, (5) motor-perceptual development, and (6) sound-symbol correspondence. Emphasis was placed on presenting the reading readiness activities in sequential steps. (DH)

Jennie Dearmin

AN EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAM FOR DISADVANTAGED KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN

Five years ago, the Federal Government made money available to states under Title I of the Elementary Secondary Education Act to develop programs for children from low income families who were not meeting success in our schools. Districts were charged with the responsibility of studying the needs of children having difficulty in school and then designing programs to meet those needs -- a task far more difficult than would appear on the surface. Most of the programs across the nation centered around the language arts with emphasis on reading. The new guidelines now make it compulsory for districts to concentrate on reading.

Two years ago, our district was invited to participate in a pilot pre-reading program for kindergarten. After studying the program and before accepting, we asked ourselves two questions ....

... Can a formal pre-reading program, built around purposeful games and activities administered with each child in mind, start him on the road toward becoming a successful and independent reader?

... Can this program be the initial step in the continuous reading process that is a slow building up of skills that will flourish during the lifetime of each child? So that, as Aldous Huxley said, "Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the ways in which he exists, and make his life full, significant, and interesting."

We believe this program can. First, however, we recognize that the key to any successful program is the teacher. The teacher who knows, understands, and has a keen interest in helping each child reach his fullest potential. The teacher who is willing to adapt to change, to experiment,

to try, and, yes, to fail knowing that in so doing, she is reaching out for ways to help all children. And, lastly, the teacher who is willing to devote extra hours to prepare lessons with purposes that grow out of felt needs from the things children are seeing, doing, hearing, and experiencing.

Among children of beginning school age are marked differences in many aspects of development that effect their readiness for reading. They differ in their background of experience and information, and in their attitudes toward school and learning. They differ in mental, physical, emotional, and social maturity. They differ in the ability to express themselves, to listen with understanding, to remember, to follow directions, to think critically, and to discriminate aurally and visually.

Fortunate, indeed, is the child who comes from a home where he is given the attention and experiences that help to make him ready to learn to read. In such a home, parents take care of his health needs, read aloud and tell him stories, listen patiently, encourage questions and answer them readily and accurately, take him on trips, make interesting books available, and enjoy reading themselves.

Then there are those children, the ones involved in our program, whose backgrounds of experiences have been limited. All children, and especially these, need the motivation and information provided by such opportunities as a rich classroom environment, taking trips around the school and community, listening to records and tape recordings, and viewing filmstrips and films. Through real and vicarious experiences, the children's horizons are widened; they learn to use their eyes and their ears, and they have something to talk about among themselves and others.

The two broad purposes of the reading readiness program in which we were involved were:

... to create a growing desire to read, and

... to introduce the skills that are necessary for success and satisfaction in reading.

In building a readiness for reading, it is important that children learn to:

... adapt physically, emotionally, and socially to working in school.

... listen attentively and critically.

.. comprehend and respond to what is heard.

... communicate orally, learning to speak "standard English" before being expected to read or write.

... associate printed and written materials with ideas.

... recognize and reproduce speech sounds and their symbols.

... establish a pattern of eye movements from left to right, from top to bottom, and from one page to the next one.

.., recognize and read some common and useful words found in the community and school environments, including labels and signs.

... understand the concepts and vocabulary of the first basic readers, and recognize certain key sight words.

Many activities in this program centered around helping children adjust to school living, to develop good listening and observing skills, to increase their ability to express themselves orally, to develop auditory and visual discriminations, and to build body awareness and to improve coordination. Because personal involvement is a most important key to learning, emphasis was placed upon the active participation of every child.

Part of the pre-reading program was to provide experiences that were an extension of those children usually have at home. In a getting-acquainted period at the beginning of the school term, the teacher learned much about the background of each child and supplemented it with:

... a classroom setting that provided opportunities for children to observe, explore, and discover.

... first-hand experience in the wider school and community environments.

... informal reading contacts.

Through wise guidance, including detailed planning, the teacher increased the children's curiosity, interest, and fund of information.

This reading readiness program is built on the premise that the skills in the reading process are the same on the pre-reading level as at the highest stage of reading development. The chief differences are those of degree and refinement. Developing the ability to comprehend and interpret ideas symbolized in writing or printing is begun formally when a child first enters school and continues, hopefully, during his entire program of education.

The materials for the program included:

I. THE TEACHER'S MANUAL

The pre-reading skills to be taught during the year were divided into six major headings:

... listening for comprehension

... listening for auditory discrimination

... visual skills

... oral language skills

... motor-perceptual skills

... sound-symbol correspondence skills.

There were many suggested lessons aimed toward each of the six skills: Each lesson had for its primary purpose an emphasis upon improving one of these skills.

The lesson was divided into six sections:

... purpose

... preparation

... presentation

... evaluation in terms of the purpose

... pupil practice material

... additional experiences.

II. PUPIL PRACTICE MATERIALS

Pupil practice material samples were included with each lesson. The purpose of the practice materials was immediate reinforcement of a skill that had just been taught.

III. PICTURE CARDS

Picture cards were used in a variety of ways. Lesson plans and/or suggestions for some of their uses were given in the guide. The picture cards were used to stimulate imagination, help in noting of details, picture reading, and story telling. Picture cards, too, served ss inspiration for painting, as motivation for dramatic play, and as stimulation for creative language, including stories dictated to the teacher.

IV. LARGE FLANNELBOARD AND POCKET CHART

The large flannelboard and pocket chart were big enough to be seen by a group of children. They were used by either the teacher or a child. The flannelboard held cut-outs of story characters, objects, letters, and numbers. The pocket chart served as another illustrative aid.

V. INDIVIDUAL FLANNELBOARD, POCKET CHART AND CHALKBOARD

There were small flannelboards, pocket charts, and chalkboards for each child in a group. Small groups were formed on the basis of specific needs. By having individual manipulative materials for each child in the group, the teacher made sure that every child was involved in the activity and learning, and had instant feed-back on individual progress.

VI. FLANNELBOARD CUT-OUTS AND PATTERNS

"Cut-outs" of the characters and objects from a story were used on the large flannelboard to illustrate a story when telling or retelling it. Other "cut-outs" were used in teaching about 1) shape, size, and color, 2) sight-sound-symbol correspondence, and 3) numerals and simple number concepts.

VII. HAND PUPPETS AND PATTERNS

Children are apt to lose much of their self-consciousness when they use hand puppets. They are intent upon manipulating the puppet appropriately and actually become the puppet character. Puppets were used to motivate oral language, both for retelling a story and for creating stories or conversations.

VIII. BOOKS

The books for this program were chosen primarily because of their universal appeal to four, five, and six year olds. Other criteria the books meet were those of high literary quality, worthwhile illustrations, and appropriate format. The collection comprised a variety of categories, including:

... Mother Goose

... Poetry

... Fairy or Folk Tales

... Animal Stories

... ABC Book

... 2 Song Books

IX. PHONEME BOXES WITH SMALL OBJECTS

Each box contains little objects, most of whose names begin with one of the consonants. Children say the names of the objects and decide which ones started like a certain word from a pre-primer.

There were six major skills in the pre-reading program.

I. LISTENING FOR COMPREHENSION OF CONTENT

The ability to listen often is taken for granted and therefore is seldom taught specifically. However, efficient listening must be learned and practiced. Because it is so important to speech, language, and reading, more attention was given to it.

Before children can discriminate aurally, they need to listen to content. The purpose of the lessons centered around listening for pleasure and relaxation, comprehending what someone read or said, memorizing, remembering, and following directions. The children ...

... listened to poems, songs and recordings for pleasure and relaxation, and with an awareness of mood. They identified those parts of a selection that suggested the story.

... listened as the teacher read or told a story to ...

a. answer questions the teacher asked to direct or test their listening.

b. recall and tell parts of the story.

The teacher noted which children needed to hear directions more than once, and which ones had difficulty recalling a two and three part direction.

II. AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION AND DEVELOPMENT

As a prelude to the aural discrimination of words and word elements, the children had many directed listening experiences. After the children learned to listen to the teacher, to each other, to music, and to sounds in their environment, the teacher began the development of the concepts of:

... volume or intensity (loud and soft)

... pitch (high or low)

... direction (up and down)

... duration (long and short)

...sequence (order)

... accent (stress)

... tempo (fast and slow)

... repetition and contrast

... distance (near and far).

When the children recognized differences in sounds that were loud and soft, fast and slow, high and low, long and short; when they identified repetition and contrast; when they were sensitive to rhythm, duration, and accent, many were able to make the finer discriminations regarding words: rhyming elements, initial and final consonants, and slight differences in words that sound somewhat alike.

III. VISUAL DISCRIMINATION AND DEVELOPMENT

A skill of major importance to reading is the ability to recognize likenesses and differences. However, before children can make comparisons, they should learn to note details and get meaning from what they see. School excursions and walking trips give children opportunities to observe and become acquainted with the world beyond their immediate neighborhood. Firsthand experience helped children to understand concepts represented in pictures and picture stories that otherwise might have no meaning.

Interpreting pictures is an important pre-reading skill. A story can be woven around a single picture with content; a group of related pictures can be arranged in sequence. Although the skills of observing and interpreting are being emphasized, other skills are being learned, too. The children listen as the teacher asks a question to direct their attention; they practice oral language as they tell the picture story; and as they interpret the story told in the pictures, they make inferences, predict outcomes, get the main idea, and note relevant details.

Children should be able to note gross likenesses and differences before they are expected to make finer discriminations. Picture matching games and the comparing and contrasting of pictures, objects, and geometric forms laid a foundation for the further study of visual skills.

IV. ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS

There are several areas related to improving oral expression. They include:

... the ability to express ideas understandably to others

... learning to speak with expression that helps to convey ideas, and with a voice quality that is pleasing to hear

... learning to use complete and well-structured sentences

... constantly increasing the speaking and understanding vocabularies

... improving pronunciation and diction.

V. MOTOR-PERCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

Through directed lessons, a child learns to coordinate vision and movement. He becomes aware of parts of his body -- his head, trunk, arms, legs, feet, and hands, and how he can manipulate them; he perceives positions of objects in relation to himself -- above, below, under, over, to the left, the right, etc.; he learns body control through exercises; he plays games, learns dances, interprets music and ideas with movement, and practices skills involved with these activities. Later, he develops finer motor coordination through opportunities to construct, cut, paste, trace, and color. Eventually, he is ready for paper and pencil exercises that further refine hand-eye coordination.

VI. SOUND-SYMBOL CORRESPONDENCE

Practice was given to reinforce the learning of the sounds of the alphabet letters. Aural and visual recognition, as well as letter

discrimination, were stressed by associating pure letter sounds with the corresponding names and symbols, using objects and pictures. In the last step in the development of sound-symbol correspondence, children learn to write the various letters of the alphabet in manuscript form.

The ability to count from one to ten was presented in the same sequence as letter recognition.

Reading readiness, including the specific skills to be learned in a pre-reading program, should be taught in sequential steps. Readiness is not something that just happens. There is general agreement that the building of reading readiness grows in a rich environment that provides many first hand and vicarious experiences. It also requires a knowledgeable, dedicated, and enthusiastic teacher who is capable of inspiring children to learn.